

LOCAL DIVING

RHODE ISLAND BLUES — AND MAKOS

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Rhode Island, “The Ocean State,” has almost 400 miles of tidal coastline. It is without a doubt an ocean-lover’s dream. Although it’s the smallest state in the U.S., it is one of the country’s treasures.

When planning to dive Rhode Island, one of the first things that might come to your attention is the *U-853*, a Type IXC U-boat, which fought in the Battle of the Atlantic for the German Kriegsmarine during World War II. American warships sank the *U-853* during the Battle of Point Judith on May 6, 1945, which resulted in the loss of its entire crew. The wreck — Rhode Island’s most famous scuba diving attraction — lies broken and torn just east of Block Island in 120 feet of water.

In addition to being home to some of the country’s finest wreck diving, Rhode Island also offers blue and mako shark expeditions that deliver some of the most intense and unforgettable open-water shark encounters you can find anywhere in the world.

BLUE SHARKS

Named for their radiant color, blue sharks are among the most distinctive sharks in the sea. Their torpedolike bodies are equipped with extremely long pectoral fins and an elongated caudal fin to provide exceptional swimming power. Adults can grow to 12 or 13 feet long. A blue shark’s diet consists mainly of small fish along with invertebrates such as cuttlefish and squid.

Found worldwide, they migrate thousands of miles each year, roaming the vast open ocean. In certain areas they travel closer to shore, which gives rise to opportunities for diving with them. When scuba diving



From top: a shortfin mako; a blue shark breaks the surface.



A diver photographs a passing blue shark.

was in its infancy, blues were one of the first species of shark that people dived with outside of a cage. Due to their temperament and curious nature they are ideal sharks for divers to interact with. At first glance they may appear sluggish, but don't be fooled. When they need to be, blues are one of the fastest sharks in the sea.

Once you're in the water, their overt curiosity becomes immediately evident, as does their striking beauty. Blues are one of the most colorful sharks you'll find. Their appearance can go from a dark cerulean blue to a deep purplish sheen. If you're lucky and the lighting is just right, you'll see shimmering speckles of gold on their snouts. At times they appear almost serpentine as they slither through the water, flexing and turning to lunge at hang baits and fish scraps. Blue sharks are an underwater photographer's dream. The repeated close encounters they deliver can provide divers with memories and images to treasure for a lifetime.

MAKO SHARKS

Shortfin makos are the fastest sharks in the sea. They have to be — they hunt some of the fastest fish, including tuna, swordfish and bonito. They also feed on cephalopods, sea birds and, once the sharks are fully grown, large marine mammals. An average adult is approximately 9-10 feet long. Mature females can reach 14 feet and weigh 1,100 pounds or more.

Although fishermen see them, it's uncommon for

divers to see makos. Like blue sharks, makos are a pelagic species that lives and hunts in the endless open ocean. When the warm currents of the Gulf Stream come closest to the Eastern seaboard, so do the migrating sharks.

In the summer, New England waters become a battleground for shortfin makos. They're a favorite target of sport fishermen due to their explosive agility and extreme fighting power. They're known to leap 20 feet out of the water when hooked, and they'll occasionally unleash their fury by charging or hurling themselves into the boat.

Tales of the makos' wrath are

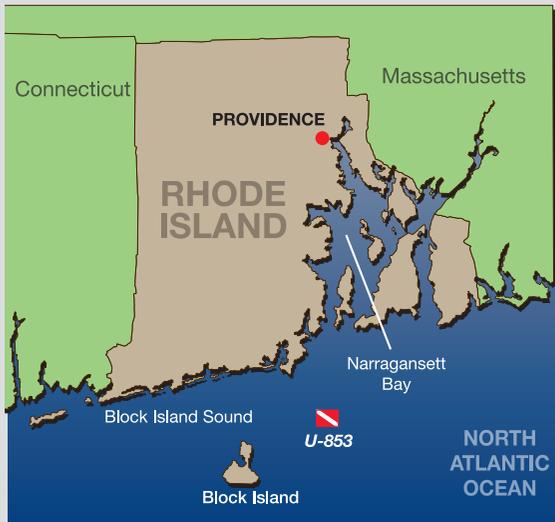
legendary. As far as in-water encounters go, getting a mako at the boat is always a special treat. Larger individuals often arrive in a splash of power, striking the hang baits without warning. If there's a flurry of excitement, the shark may not stick around for very long. There's a good chance they've experienced the menace of a fishing boat before.

Some of the larger makos we see show signs of human interactions, as do some of the blues. Whether it's an imbedded hook, open wounds or a long-line trailing far behind them, many of the sharks bear the scars of battles with fishermen. Other than people, full-grown makos have very few natural predators. Large makos are out there, but due to the constant pressures of commercial fishing their numbers are in decline. If you have the opportunity to dive with a mako, it will be a smaller juvenile.



A blue shark at night

HOW TO DIVE IT



CONDITIONS: Shark season in Rhode Island runs from June through August each year. Air temperatures vary from the low 60s to the upper 80s (°F). One can never be sure of the weather, especially while on the water, so it's best to dress in layers to be prepared for varying temperatures. Expect water temperatures between 60°F and 75°F at the surface.

GETTING THERE: Rhode Island is easily accessible by car from anywhere in the northeastern United States. Domestic flights are available to Providence, R.I., while coast-to-coast and international travelers can fly into Boston Logan Airport. From there, it's approximately a two-hour drive to southern Rhode Island.

ON THE SURFACE: Both Rhode Island and Massachusetts offer an abundance of natural beauty as well as history, dining, beaches and summer entertainment. Consider a trip to Newport, Providence, Boston or Cape Cod for shopping and dining, or take a Fast Ferry to Block Island or Martha's Vineyard for a day.

GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS: Book a minimum of two to three days at sea. These are wild pelagic animals, and nothing is guaranteed. Rent a car to get from the airport to your hotel and from the hotel to the dock each morning. With a car you'll have the freedom to dine and explore in the evenings. Day trips last approximately 10 to 12 hours, departing from Point Judith, R.I., at 6 a.m. If you are prone to seasickness, be sure to bring medication along with the usual topside essentials for a day at sea.

For more information, send an email to info@333productions.com.

Once acclimated, a mako may stay around the boat for hours, offering incredible photo and video opportunities of one of the most impressive sharks in the ocean. If you get the chance to dive with a mako, it might well be one of the highlights of your life. They are thrilling to observe, and their adrenaline is contagious.

GETTING WET

Expeditions to see the blues and makos are cageless open-water encounters that don't involve scuba. The boat chums while drifting with the current over deep water. A full wetsuit is required along with a hood, gloves, mask, fins and snorkel. The encounter is geared toward photographers and videographers. Divers who don't have large cameras carry a shark stick, which is provided. Divers enter the water from the stern, swim to the side of the vessel and position themselves with their backs toward the boat.

The crew moves and manipulates a hang bait from the deck to keep the sharks interested. Blue sharks typically show a high level of interest in divers and come extremely close, inspecting you with their large buttonlike eyes. You'll need to use your camera or a shark stick to create a barrier for the sharks to respect.

Blue sharks, which average 6 to 9 feet in length, sometimes arrive in packs of four to eight and generally dominate the dives. Makos are rarer; they usually come alone, and the slightest disturbance can cause them to dart off, never to return. If a mako shows up, it's best to keep quiet and allow the shark to develop some confidence and decide to stay around. Regardless of what species arrives first, once you are in the water, you'll get plenty of attention and very close encounters.

ADDITIONAL SIGHTINGS

While blue and mako shark encounters are the goal of these expeditions, nothing is guaranteed. You never know what you might come across while out at sea. Other possible sightings include dolphins, humpback whales, basking sharks, ocean sunfish, smooth hammerheads, minke whales and more. It's always good to have a topside camera on hand just in case something unexpected appears.

This trip is available for all experience levels; it is not scuba diving. If you don't have previous experience snorkeling or freediving with large sharks in open water, a guide will be in the water with you at all times. When you're not in the water, you'll have plenty of opportunities for topside photography. **AD**



A breaching humpback